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“Hidden Resistance”

The Collectivization Process in Szeklerland¹



ABSTRACT

Collectivization was a characteristic phenomenon of the period of communism and its aim was the complete transformation of the rural society and of rural farming according to the Soviet model. During this process an aggressive liquidation of the private farms and the foundation of collective agricultural large-scale farms took place. The process of collectivization in Szeklerland lasted from 1947–48 until 1962. This long lasting period manifested itself in its complexity, generating fierce emotions, conflicts, but at the same time creating pretended agreement, silent opposition, uncertainty and anxiety. In this essay I will try to sketch – without the purpose of giving an allinclusive picture about this phenomenon – some important events of the epoch of collectivization, writing in detail about the hidden resistance and struggles of people against authority at that time in Szeklerland.

KEYWORDS

collectivization, Szeklerland, hidden resistance

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¹ This text is a revised and reverse version of the “*Rejtette ellenállás*”. A kollektivizálás Székelyföldön lezajlott folyamatáról. *Új Nézőpont* 2017. no. 1.

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I am going to write about the process of collectivization in Szeklerland, about the hidden resistance of people against the authority, on the one hand following the book entitled *Így kollektivizáltak minket*² [How we were collectivized] by JULIANNA BODÓ and on the other hand based on the essay *Küzdelem a túlélésért*³ [The struggle for survival] by SÁNDOR OLÁH. Collectivization was a determining phenomenon of the epoch of socialism, meaning the total change of the rural society and farming on basis of the Soviet model. It was a complex process, the main goal of the communist agricultural policy being to form common-collective agricultural farms instead of individual ones.⁴ During this process the forced liquidation of the private peasant farms took place and producer cooperatives (agricultural large-scale farms) were formed. The process of collectivization began in Szeklerland with the communist takeover (1947–1948) and it lasted until 1962. In this essay I will try to sketch – without the purpose of giving an allinclusive picture about this phenomenon – some important events of the epoch of collectivization, writing in detail about the hidden resistance and struggles of people against authority at that time in Szeklerland.

Until 1950 four counties, Marosszék, Háromszék, Udvarhelyszék and Csíkszék had been considered “*Szekler*” counties, which carried on even in their names the tradition of the old Szekler “*széks*” – seats (“*seats*” were typically Szekler administrative units). In the period of the collectivization, beside the constant new regulations regarding the reorganization of social life, rural farms and private property, restructuring of administration took place as well. Instead of the division county/district/commune, there were founded provinces after the Soviet model, consisting of rayons. The communal status of several villages was abolished, and they were subordinated to commune centers.⁵

The analyses and series of interviews presented in the above quoted volume of JULIANNA BODÓ were made in two villages of Szeklerland: in Korond (Udvarhelyszék) and in Menaság (Csíkszék) within the framework of the programme entitled *Transforming Property, Person and State: Collectivization in Romania, 1949–1962*.⁶ The other author, SÁNDOR OLÁH writes in his essay *The struggle for survival* about a series of silent battles between the people of the villages along Homoród river (Udvarhelyszék) and the state authority during the period of collectivization.⁷ He discusses in detail the hidden resistance of people against the authority during the years of collectivization. Although the analyses of the two authors based on a thorough fieldwork were carried out in not more than three or four Szekler villages, they can be generalized for the whole region. On occasion of an earlier work, I myself made life-interviews with some older villagers of Szépvíz (Csíkszék), who spoke about the period of the collectivization at length on that occasion, evoking their state of mind during that period. I worked up the biographical interviews based on the book entitled (2009) *Narratív történetformák* [Narrative story forms] written by IMRE PÁSZKA.

² BODÓ 2004.

³ OLÁH 2001.

⁴ LÁSZLÓ 2010. 1.; LÁSZLÓ 2009. 57.

⁵ Ibid. 10.

⁶ BODÓ 2004.

⁷ OLÁH 2001.

The substance of the autobiographical narratives is the perpetual discussion upon life, during which the personal issues of an individual is narrated. The individual experiences of this process “*neither can be observed nor be screened*” – it can be revealed through narration.⁸

The stories in the essays of the Julianna Bodó and Sándor Oláh resemble very much to the ones, which the people who I interviewed told me about the period of collectivization, so I am going to use some relevant details from my interviews as well.

In the process of collectivization the aim of the political executive was to transform rural society to abrogate private property, to introduce planned economy and to take away from people their income from agricultural activity through the complete transformation of rural society. The representatives of the authority intended to form collective farms by rearranging ownership relations in order to take control of production and trading of goods in rural areas. Another goal of the political leaders was to liquidate the peasant farmers and kulaks (prosperous peasants) who were regarded as exploiters by the new communist system and to advance the landless and poor peasants.⁹ On social level they intended to break the local authority's power and the cultural resistance, to reduce the influence of the clergy, to undermine the elite made up of the rich farmers (kulaks) and to bring up another elite from the poor, landless peasants, who would be faithful to the new political system.¹⁰ Thus the ownership relations were transformed, the role of the peasantry changed and all this lead to the takeover of power by the communist party. “*In course of the execution of this plan the self-governed socio-economical institutions of the villages (headborough) were eliminated, others were transformed to propaganda-meeting events (the farmers' clubs), the other community properties (associations of forest holders, common ownerships, mountain communities) ceased to exist after their property had been collectivized. The elimination of such institutions meant at the same time the end of the rural civil society, of the variety, of different civil self-organization forms, and it prepared the process of the social homogenization.*”¹¹

In Szeklerland the local societies used a variety of resistance strategies and therefore the collectivization was not a coherent process in this region. In spite of this, although with time differences, the farmer cooperatives had been formed in most of the Szekler villages by the end of the fifties. Although the actual collectivization process did not take place right at the beginning of the fifties, the Szekler farmers felt in many respects, that their private property (their family lands) was in danger. In this period such local people got into leading positions, who did not possess any lands or agricultural goods at all, or they did not have any authority or prestige before their community. Related to this change, people considered, that the rate of the compulsory delivery of goods was unfair. The several restrictive measures imposed on the rural society in this period, restricted the right of people for free decisions and free actions almost completely. It was not allowed for them to sell their crops and animals, instead the burden of compulsory delivery was more and more heavier on their shoulders.

They did not dare to stand up openly against the mighty of the system, but they tried to withstand suppression and exploitation in tacit collaboration. They could not accept from the persons, who came into leading positions too easily, the humiliating behaviour and the manners of superiority. They considered, that the collecting of goods was arbitrary, abusive and unjust, especially with the leadership of those people, who were not respected by them, who did not own any land property and did not like to work either.¹²

⁸ PÁSZKA 2009. 477.

⁹ BÁRDI – LÁSZLÓ 2008. 234.; LÁSZLÓ 2009. 57–58.

¹⁰ LÁSZLÓ 2010. 1.

¹¹ BÁRDI – LÁSZLÓ 2008. 234.

¹² BODÓ 2004. 12–13.

“The great majority of these people were uneducated, lazy, worth of nothing. They could be easily influenced by some flattering promises and by the power, that they had got in their hands. After all, they did not have anything to lose, because they did not own anything. They had the power now in the village, they had become the leaders of the community. The roles had been changed. Servants became leaders and commanders, they stole anything and anywhere, where they had an occasion to do so.”¹³

The financial burden was not the only reason of the resistance, the desperation felt because of the exploitation by the state was an aggravating factor as well. Fortunately the confidence of the people for each other played a big role in this period. Villagers helped each other, especially those mates, whose burdens imposed by the state were bigger, than they could cope with. Where the social strata were more outlined, the number of denunciations grew as well. Usually denunciations did not concern the people from their own environment but those, who had outstanding social positions – thus the kulaks were the most affected in these cases.

As I have already mentioned, an important goal of the political leaders in the period of collectivization was to make the life of the prosperous farmers (kulaks), belonging to the elite of the village harder and harder. In 1947 the communist takeover all over Romania took place. At first a huge press campaign began against the “kulaks” and then the decision was taken on the implementation of restricting measures against kulaks. There were imposed additional burdens on the kulaks in the whole country.

“The tension in the family was big, we were under great pressure, that resulted in a constant depressed mood. My parents were afraid, they did not know what to expect, and reigned by their daily fears, hopelessness and uncertainty they listened to the radio. They knew that they need to hold on because of the their four children, which they want to bring up and support. We were exposed to the system, our parents knew, that they would be among the first people, who would lose everything, who would be dragged around and imprisoned.”¹⁴

At the beginning of the fifties the actions against the kulaks had started, and this was an another reason, why people felt, that their land properties and goods were in danger. Kulaks were considered all those wealthy villagers and their families, who possessed more hectares of land property and agricultural products and had a great prestige among the people of their community, moreover their lifestyle was a kind of model in the eyes of the villagers.¹⁵

“On the day my father signed the paper, all fellow villagers on the Gyimes street signed it, too. He had a great prestige in the village. People thought, if B.T. has nothing to lose, we do not have either. One of the organizers of the campaign told my father: – you should keep in mind, that this is the last deadline. Should you have refused to sign this paper, you would have ended with broken shankbones.”¹⁶

The properties (the outbuildings) of the kulak farmers were confiscated for the head office of the collective farms and for the buildings of the farms. Their persecution and humiliation meant for their fellow villagers the destruction of the example, that they had followed before. At the same time this measure made the security of private property questionable. It is important to mention here, that in the Szekler villages, the agricultural cooperatives were established with time differences. We also have information about some villages, where these cooperatives were

¹³ FEKETE DEÁK 2012.

¹⁴ FEKETE DEÁK 2013.

¹⁵ LÁSZLÓ 2013. 15.

¹⁶ FEKETE DEÁK 2012.

not established at all. At the beginning of the fifties there were already some rumours about the coming collectivization, people knew, that in the places where these cooperatives existed, the lands, the agricultural equipments and the animals were taken away, this fact generated constant fear, anxiety and insecurity, which had in many ways a strong impact on the life of families. First of all people were afraid of what the fate of their family land properties will be. Some farmers sold their lands, taking into account that these would be taken from them anyway sooner or later. Though there were some families, who hoped, that collectivization will not take place and on the contrary they bought lands.

Insecurity and revulsion arouse from the fact, that *“goof-offs”* and *“people of no worth”* got into leading positions and their power became bigger and bigger. These were the people who went from house to house in the Szekler villages and using different methods – persuasion at first, then violence, too – they tried to force the farmers to join the collective farms. People had to give up as a result of the constant assaults a part of their property in favour of the cooperatives, and those who did not resign, faced serious threats. More specifically the foundation of cooperatives happened as follows: from the surrounding towns, where the administrative centres were established, agitators came into the village and they organized these cooperatives. At first only those farmers joined the cooperative, who agreed to the ideas of collectivization and who themselves collaborated in this organization work. In the initial phase it was enough to join with only one small piece of land and with one animal, for instance a sheep. But the wealthier landowners did not want to join even with a small piece of land either, because they knew, that this would finish with the confiscation of all their goods. The measures against the kulaks had already begun, but even so not less than half of the kulaks of the villages were not members of the cooperatives.¹⁷

In July 1950 under the pressure of the central authority the rhythm of collectivization speeded up, more aggressive methods were applied in order to force people to join the collective farms. If persuasion did not work, violence and harassment followed. (People were called to the Council, or to the Militia, some of them were beaten, others were executed or taken as hostages). In Maros county for example two farmers were killed in order to intimidate the villagers. As a reaction to the massive violence people organized demonstrations in some localities of Szeklerland. Such demonstrations took place on the territory of Háromszék county (in Kézdivásárhely and in the villages around the town Sepsiszentgyörgy) and in Marosszék (in the villages around Radnót).

The central authority was quick to respond and deported the farmers, which were considered to have been the leaders of these movements. In Háromszék county there were 34 families the members of which were disgraced. Some of these families were deported to Romanian counties, others were sentenced to prison.¹⁸ The most severe clash took place in Sepsigidófalva on September 22, 1950. The villagers, who rose to defend the families which had received the order of deportation, clashed with the Militia commanded to the spot. Two local farmers were shot dead. By the end of the year 1950, forced collectivization had come to an end and in the upcoming period stress was laid on the organisation of the already founded collective farms. At the same time those farmers, who had already joined these collectives before, used different techniques (either avoided work or stole or concealed existing lands) to protect themselves and their property through hidden resistance against exploitation.¹⁹

¹⁷ BODÓ 2004. 15.

¹⁸ LÁSZLÓ 2010. 1.

¹⁹ Ibid. 1.

“HOPELESS FIGHT – THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL”

SÁNDOR OLÁH writes about the long series of silent battles in the period of collectivization between the people of the villages along Homoród river and the state authority. He discusses in detail the hidden resistance of the villagers against authority in the period of collectivization. We have got only little data about these attempts of hidden resistance, the author gathers credible information mainly from narrations, from personal encounters. The silent conflicts evoked in the essay were characteristic not only to the villages along the river Homoród, but also to other regions of the Szeklerland, where the process of collectivization took place in the same way. In the desperate, hopeless struggle people needed their entire ingenuity in order to face the monopolizers armoured with the shameful means of the political power, and to protect their property in some way.

We know from some reports written by tax collectors and functionaries to their superiors, that people tried to thwart the system with all means: sometimes they negated the extension of their territories or they tried to have profits by not declaring the whole volume of their crops and feedingstuffs in order to avoid in this way compulsory delivery or to diminish its extent.²⁰ They became aware, that they need to deliver less crops for the denied lands or for the lands which are owned by different members of the family, in this way the truth was revealed only when the inspecting commissions came to see various households.

Sometimes the inspecting person or the whole commission took decisions on the basis of ridiculous reasons: “*separate manure piles*” or “*crops put in different stacks*”. The tardy flow of existing data made maintenance of accurate records impossible, that is why in the case of some settlements the required data did not arrive on time or did not arrive at all to their destination. Thus neither the local nor the superior state organs could make reference to accurate information. Furthermore the farmers succeeded to get payments of advance from the state for crops, which they did not deliver later, on basis of fictitious agreements signed under false names.²¹

The control of identity of the involved persons became impossible, too. The fact, that people dictated false names of non-existent, false identity cards made the work of the inspecting authorities very difficult as well, because penalties imposed on false names could not be collected later. If farmers denied the number of animals, the extent of the crops owed in taxes decreased too and they needed to pay less taxes.

It appears from many documents, that there were founded commissions for the determination of the number of animals, especially of the sheep and these commissions carried out controls regularly. On the occasion of these inspections, the men of the authority often found twice more animals than the farmers had previously declared, as a result the superior organs demanded more severe controls and asked for supplementary compulsory deliveries. In many cases people pretended to be naive and uninformed or simply they lied to avoid the compulsory deliveries and the unfair taxation. They realized, that pretended lack of knowledge might be useful, because tax collectors could not do anything in that case. Tax collectors on their turn, seeing the effects of this pretended lack of knowledge, did the same thing in their reports to their superiors.²²

One important momentum of the collective farming and of the inspections was threshing. On these occasions the inspectors could better control the quantity of the threshed grain and

²⁰ OLÁH 2001. 208–210.

²¹ Ibid.

²² FEKETE DEÁK 2012.

could supervise the extent of the compulsorily delivered crops. Naturally there existed some outlying villages, where people avoided the common threshings not once with the help of the functionaries of the state. The violations of law which happened to come to light were followed by denunciations. Because of the problems of approaching the remote villages, in many cases the tax collectors and inspecting commissions could make inspections very rarely, and in some cases these inspections did not happen at all. There existed also some cases when foreign inspectors did not get any help at all from the local delegates, representatives.

The wealthier farmers would have liked to escape somehow from the obligations of the cooperative farming and it was pretty difficult to make them join the cooperative, moreover in some cases this turned out to be impossible. Pretending, that they understand the idea of collective farming, they tried with different pretexts to delay their joining the organization. At the meetings and on the occasion of different discussions almost everybody agreed to the ideas of the cooperative farming, but when the moment of signing of the entry declaration arrived, people found a lot of pretexts to avoid this. It was noticeable during the whole period the delaying of things, the non-payment of taxes, the non-declaration of the extent of animal stocks, crops, lands. Still the biggest problem for the farmers constituted the entry in the collective farm and the moment of the signing of the entry form. More and more commissions and organizations were founded, but they could not achieve big results in the convincing of people to enter the collective farms, moreover some of the members of the commissions themselves did not enter the farming cooperatives at all, or they joined only very late.

*"Almost every day organizers came to us at undefined times, sometimes at night, sometimes very late in the evening looking for my father to get him sign the entry form. I was a little girl, and they asked me, where my father was. I showed in the direction, where I saw my father disappear, but fortunately when they got to the place, he was not there."*²³

Finally the delays, the avoiding of the meetings and gatherings lead to the result, that the collective farms were not founded at all or were founded only partially. Even the delegates or the elected commission members delayed the organization of these farms, invoking different reasons. In the year 1957 the authorities loosened their grip, the crop prices grew a little bit, many kulaks got exemptions. It was declared, that the delivery of crops was not compulsory any more, people should conclude contracts only for the quantities, which they did not need at their farms. Farmers often avoided the delivery of crops by saying they need the whole crop at their farms. As a result of the fact, that the system was less severe, people contracted less and less crops, and even those small quantities were not delivered either.

In several cases the members of the commissions themselves did not fulfill their obligations of delivery and so they lost their "moral grounds" to convince the farmers about the importance of contracting the crops. Collectivist leaders sent from foreign places criticised and blamed the local commissions more and more because of the frauds noticed at the compulsory deliveries of crops. Despite this many commission members began an information campaign against compulsory deliveries and against the conclusion of contracts.²⁴

The payment of agistments went more and more slower, the farmers tried to justify the non-payment of taxes in different ways. They accumulated more and more debts and many farmers refused to meet almost all their obligations.

²³ OLÁH 2001. 217–219.

²⁴ OLÁH 2001. 222–223.

The farmers invoked many reasons for the non-payment of taxes, one of these was “*bad weather*”. It appears from the records of seizures, that several times local tax collectors notified the indebted villagers to pay their debts. The notices were followed by direct visits to the indebted people. If the members of the commissions stated, that the farmer did not pay his taxes with bad intention, the enforcement followed directly. Records were drawn up about the enforcements, which in several cases remained stuck. Using this lack of consistence, many farmers chose to wait rather than deliver the compulsory crops. The commissions sought their superiors repeatedly to ask for the adjourning or for the abolition of the deadline of the compulsory delivery of crops. The goal of these requests was naturally to achieve, that the farmers should deliver less crops to the state or should not deliver any crops at all. Yet, the superior commissions did not agree to the requested reductions. The biggest arrears arose by the compulsory delivery of meat. The delays and the ignorance of the formal notices entailed in many cases emergency measures and seizures as defined in Act 131/1952 on Seizure.²⁵

*“Act 131/1952 on Seizure was in the whole period the most often mentioned »last« coercive means of the collection campaigns. There always existed dissuasive examples of seizures or separately managed cases – the authority took care of this – but generally the local and raional apparatus postponed the imposing of the fines provided by law and the compulsory enforcements.”*²⁶ People used every means in order to evade the duty of delivering their crops. The easiest and most uncontrollable way for this was shrugging off responsibilities. The person called to account, justified the non-delivery of the crops with some reasons, which could not be controlled by the commission. Such a reason was, that the machines did not operate properly or the field was not appropriate for sowing, etc.

The biggest problem was, as earlier, too, the signing of the definitive entry declaration in the collective farm, because people knew exactly, that those who choose to enter the cooperative, would sooner or later lose their lands, agricultural machines and animals. So farmers sought for more and more loopholes to avoid the definitive entry. On joining the collective farm, both husband and wife had to sign the entry form, sometimes the heads of the families invoked the fact, that they could not convince their wives about the entry yet. Therefore a separate propaganda was applied for the recruitment of women, the attempts to convince them having some well defined characteristics. Another problem constituted the involvement of the people in outlying villages and farms, because these people were their own masters all their lives and nobody forced them to do anything earlier.

The submission of lands to the collective farms was a difficult matter as well. The farmers and the members of the local cooperatives, who made the reports either about the submission of lands or about the compulsory delivery of crops, expected, that the person sent by the superior control body, does not know anything about farming or about animal husbandry. Therefore they mentioned sometimes incorrect or too obvious reasons in order to relieve or to avoid the compulsory delivery of crops or the submission of their lands. People wanted to protect with any possible means the objects belonging to their fortunes or their other movable or immovable property, which the state wanted to take from them against their will. The inventiveness of the farmers moved on a large scale, either they denied the amount of their properties, or they transferred these to their relatives, or they hid their crops and animals in order to protect their properties in some way. Finally by the end of the fifties, due to the persistent work and to the implementation of enforcement measures, in most villages of Szeklerland the collective farms had been founded.

²⁵ OLÁH 2001. 222.

²⁶ OLÁH 2001. 235–237.

Yet despite the inciting propaganda oppositions increased, more and more commission members or people, who were considered leaders of the community and used to set an example for their mates, refused to collaborate with the local collective farms. Under the burdens it became more and more difficult to maintain order in the communities. The farmers did everything to prevent, that their lands would be assimilated and reparcelled. The matter of "*the exchange of lands*" was another measure of the new system, which created a lot of complications as well. In order to organize the cultivation of the lands properly, they needed to group the lands of the cooperative in big plots. Those farmers, who did not give in some of their lands into the cooperative, did not want to exchange their lands. Those who entered the cooperative, brought rather their poor-quality lands into the collective farm and let their good-quality lands outside. There existed cases, when instead of cultivating their own lands people ploughed the pasture of their neighbours and there they produced the amount of crops, which needed to be delivered. Sometimes they refused to meet the requests of delivery, invoking that the crop is not big enough.²⁷

The inventiveness of the farmers was boundless. They realized, that they can conclude contracts on crops, which require much less work, as the amount and the type of crop people had to produce on a given land, was not regulated. So farmers produced a larger amount of those types of crops, which were not labour-intensive and less from the types of crops which needed more work. Thus the later complaints of the commissions were in vain, they could not do anything, as long as the contracted lands were covered completely and the crops were delivered, too. Guilty was the commission, which through carelessness concluded contracts over several years on such type of crops, which favoured the respective farmers.

People also realized, that it might be better for them to give their lands as presents to others or to sell them, to slaughter their animals contrary to the prohibition or to sell them on the black market, because in this way, they could avoid entering the collective farms. The commissions noticed these practices only when the moment of the compulsory delivery arrived, and some farmers did not have any properties any more or they had only very little lands to join the collective farms with. In these cases the imposed inspection did not find any animals or crops belonging to that farmer. Yet, because of the compulsory character of the delivery, the farmers tried to fill the gap of their material loss, by selling crops of poor-quality or which were unusable. The quality of crops as well as that of the products of animal origin was doubtful: the grain was of poor-quality, the milk contained water, the wool contained water as well or was sprinkled with sand, the delivered animals were slim.

Pursuant to Decision MT 676/1959 black slaughters were punished with prison.²⁸

The people of the newly installed system did everything to prevent the farmers in their ambition to protect their property. The exploitation of the poor people and the negative effects of that epoch got to a level, where people were forced to damage the common property whenever there was an occasion to it. The grain disappeared from locked store rooms, the tools from the common penthouses, etc. The communist system tried to act against this vandalism by implementing a new jurisdiction and applying a new propaganda, which intended to appeal to the conscience of people. The tightenings brought instead of the denunciations silent consent and complicity even from the part of the commissions. Furthermore, the complete indifference regarding collective farming also damaged the common property. People had no interests in the proper keeping and feeding of the animals of the collective farms and in this way in many cases the animals died.

²⁷ OLÁH 2001. 237.

²⁸ OLÁH 2001. 238–240.

SUMMARIZING THOUGHTS

Collectivization was a characteristic phenomenon of the period of communism and its aim was the complete transformation of the rural society and of rural farming according to the Soviet model. During this process an aggressive liquidation of the private farms and the foundation of collective agricultural large-scale farms took place. The process of collectivization in Szeklerland lasted from 1947–48 until 1962. This long lasting period manifested itself in its complexity, generating fierce emotions, conflicts, but at the same time creating pretended agreement, silent opposition, uncertainty and anxiety. The several restrictive measures impeded the free decision and free acting of people almost completely. In the desperate and hopeless struggle people needed all their ingenuity to stand up to the expropriators armoured with all repressive means of the power and to protect their properties in some way. The financial burdens and the desperation felt because of the exploitation of the state caused conflicts and resistance and also some hidden activities, which were considered illegal by the state. People in Szeklerland still have not got over the events of these aggressive pursuit of power, which had as a result private and collective traumas.

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